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SUBJECT: Damascus Media Reaction: Al-Hariri Probe/Masked Witness, Syria/Iran, Iraq, Palestinian Territories (12/1)

11. Summary: Syrian papers continued to comment on statements by Syrian witness Husam Tahir Husam that he was intimidated by a group of Lebanese political, media, and security

figures to give false testimony to the international investigation commission to implicate Syria in the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri. The papers condemned those Lebanese figures and called for investigations into Husam's revelations. Papers also featured a second press conference in which Husam appealed to the highest Lebanese religious figures to protect his Lebanese fiancee and her family. He said that they are being harassed, pressured and subjected to bribery to testify against him, by the same politicians who had pressured him.

Iraq was the second theme in the papers today. Headlines featured the visits to Damascus by Hamid-Reza Asefi, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Consular Affairs, and Hareth al-Dari, Chairman of the Iraqi Association of Moslem Scholars.

Papers also reported President Bush's speech at the US Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland, in which he explained his strategy for achieving victory in Iraq and confirmed that he will keep forces there until victory is achieved.

End of summary.

12. Selected Headlines:

"FM Shara discusses regional developments and bilateral cooperation with Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister for Consular Affairs Hamid-Reza Asefi and reviews preparations for an Iraqi Reconciliation Conference with Chairman of Iraqi Association of Moslem Scholars Hareth al-Dari" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 12/1)

"Asefi: Hezbollah is a decision-maker. Cooperation with Washington is not on our agenda. Al-Dari: Accusations against Syria by some Iraqi officials do not represent the Iraqi people's opinion" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 12/1)

"The UN General Assembly calls for Israeli withdrawal from the Golan and the Palestinian territories. Mihad [Syria's Representative at the UN]: Syria's stand on the peace process is fixed and credible" (Government-owned Tishreen, 12/1)

"Husam calls on Lebanese authorities and the world community to stop intimidation and blackmail of his fiancee and her family. Husam's lawyer: My client has a lot of documented proof. 'Al-Safir' calls for definitive clarifications about the 'masked witness'" (Government-owned Tishreen, 12/1)

"Who stands behind Al-Siddiq's lies? French journalist George Malbrunot reveals the answer in Le Figaro: Who demanded that France host the 'witness'?" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 12/1)

"Le Figaro: When Saed Al-Hariri was exposed, he sacrificed Al-Siddiq. Saudi and US intelligence revealed Al-Siddiq and Chirac suggested hosting him" (Government-owned Al-Thawra, 12/1)

"The Lebanese presidency denounces statements by some MPs: allegations and misleading; a new chapter of conspiracy against Lebanon" (Government-owned Tishreen, 12/1)

"Bush promises full victory in Iraq without giving a specific date. Bush fails to relieve Americans. Democrats step up criticism" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 12/1)

"Aggression against Ofar ignites Palestinian anger. 11 Palestinians injured in Nablus clashes" (Government-owned Al-Ba'th, 12/1)

13. Editorial Block Quotes:

"At Al-Hariri's Expense, not in his Interest"

Dr. Fayed al-Sayegh, Chief Editor of government-owned Al-Thawra, said (12/1): "Syria presented Husam to the media not to prove that it is innocent of the crime of the Al-Hariri

assassination, but to show the Lebanese public the intelligence oriented mentality of the political media group that planned and committed the crime of accusing Syria....

"The people whose names were mentioned by Husam will, naturally, rush to deny the accusation that they misled the investigation.... This bloody political mafia planned to implicate Syria to serve its own interests.... It is not unlikely that the assassination crime and what followed it were the making of this mafia....

"Who should call whom to account today? Is it not logical to ask about the objective behind misleading the investigation in such bad faith, simplicity, and recklessness? Is this not a crime in the sense that it protects the real criminal and diverts attention from him and allows the forces of evil and aggression, primarily Israel, to exploit the assassination crime to settle political scores and serve their interests?

"Those Lebanese politicians and journalists applauded the masked witness and his credibility when he was in Beirut, but hurled all sorts of abuse upon him and upon his credibility when he spoke to the media in Damascus....

"The International Investigation Commission, in order to save its credibility, professionalism, and mission, should open a new track in the investigations and interrogate all those who misled international justice, wasted its time and money, and distracted the public with fabrications.

"The commission should also set up a special court to try these people...."

"For the Sake of Justice, Fairness and Truth"

Isam Dari, an editorialist in government-owned Tishreen, wrote (12/1): "The truth about the Al-Hariri assassination has gradually begun to appear; the masks have fallen from many faces, not only the face of the 'masked witness', who managed to escape from the whirlpool of lies and the swamps of conspiracy....

"What happened will reshuffle the cards and cause the collapse of reports and resolutions that were built on false information that was first imposed on the witness and then on the International Investigation Commission. This dictates that a calm and objective review of the new facts be conducted, that the real killers of Al-Hariri and the direct suspects in the crime be searched for, and that the ready-made accusations by the anti-Syria political-media machine be avoided....

"We have no doubt that the true seekers of the truth will take what happened in the past two days into consideration. They will realize that Syria was first the victim of the assassination crime, and then the victim of the lies of plotters and deceivers and of a report and resolutions that were based on those lies. Syria wants nothing other than fairness, justice, truth, and exposure of the dirty game that was played partly by a group of people who were not only ungrateful for what Syria offered to Lebanon, but who also tried to mobilize the whole world against Syria to take personal revenge, play the cheap role assigned to them, or receive a few dollars."

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